DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 103 857 CS 201 915

AUTHOR Scott, Charles T.; Angle, Burr
TITLE Experimental Program in English for Black Americans, Report No. 5: Part 1, Report on Experimental Program in English for Black Americans; Part 2, Freshman English Applications of Current Research in Black English.
INSTITUTION Wisconsin Univ., Madison. Dept. of English.
PUB DATE May 70
NOTE 21p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS College Freshmen; *Educational Research; English; *English Curriculum; *Experimental Programs; Higher Education; *Linguistic Performance; Negro Dialects; *Negro Education; Negro Students; Standard Spoken Usage

ABSTRACT

This paper is divided into two sections related to an experimental program in English for black Americans. The first section is a report describing the program. In 1969, approximately 150 black students from urban ghettos in the North and rural communities in the South were admitted to the University of Wisconsin under a special scholarship program. Students were given several tests, including the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency, and 12 of the lowest scorers volunteered for and were admitted into a special section of English 101 that used many of the methods developed for the Program in English for Foreign Students. Four initial curriculum accomplishments can be noted: classroom materials dealing with contrastive phonological features of black English and standard English were developed; an extensive "Bibliography of Black English" was constructed; a reference file of the items listed in the bibliography was compiled; and a course syllabus for this special course was completed. The second part of the paper describes the applications and effects of the course. The initial hypothesis that these students did not know standard English grammar, syntactic patterns, and pronunciation was disproved. (TS)

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ED103857

Department of English
Programs in English Linguistics
The University of Wisconsin

Report #5

Experimental Program in English
for Black Americans

May, 1970

CS 201 915

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Instructor
English 101 Special Section

PART I

Report on Experimental Program in English for Black Americans

Charles T. Scott

In Semester I, 1969-70, the Department of English, through its Programs in English Linguistics, offered on an "experimental" basis a special program in English for a limited number of black students who were entering freshmen under the Special Scholarship Program. The special program in English was offered as one of the regular sections of English 101, except that it was placed under the administrative supervision of the Programs in English Linguistics rather than the Freshman English Program. This was done for three reasons:

(1) In academic year 1968-69, teachers of English 101 had called attention to an increased number of black students who had performed poorly in the course and whose difficulties seemed to be traceable primarily to recurrent linguistic features of their spoken and written English which stigmatized their language use as "non-standard".

(2) Since 1964 in particular, sociolinguistic research in the United States has concentrated largely, though not wholly, on certain linguistic aspects (phonology and grammar especially) of the English spoken by many black Americans in the ghetto areas of the rural South and the urban North. As a consequence, there now exists a considerable body of empirical data on these speech patterns, much of which has been subjected to detailed linguistic analysis. Historically, the impetus and development of this sociolinguistic research parallels the civil rights movement of the 1960's. Faculty linguists in the Department of English are generally well informed of this research and Professor Philip Luelsdorff in particular has specialized in this area.

(3) Along with the theoretical linguistic and sociolinguistic research in "Black English",[1] many teachers of English to speakers of other languages have seen potential parallels between the methodology of teaching second languages and the methodology (if there is one) of teaching second dialects. As a consequence, numerous claims have been made to the effect that "non-standard" dialects of English might be regarded as though they were foreign languages, and, accordingly, some of the methodology characteristically used to teach English as a second language might be adapted to teach "standard" English as a second dialect. The Department of English has an established Program in English for Foreign Students and it was thought that applications and adaptations might be made from that Program to the development of a Program in English for Black Americans.

In September of 1969, approximately 150 students, virtually all of them blacks from urban ghettos in the North and rural communities in the South, were admitted to the University of Wisconsin under the Special Scholarship Program. In the week before registration, these students were tested for counseling and placement purposes by means of the University's regular battery of tests for incoming freshmen. As a result of these tests, approximately 75 of these students were placed in English 101, the English Department's basic course in composition. In order to ascertain which of these 75 students would be placed in the "experimental" section of English 101 (the section would be comprised of no more than 15 students), it was felt that a further testing device was needed. The Director of the Programs in English Linguistics proposed the use of one form of the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency, partly out of practical necessity, and partly out of curiosity. It

was thought that it might be instructive to see how native speakers of English fared on a test designed to evaluate the English language proficiency of foreign students enrolled in American colleges and universities. This proposal was accepted by the administrators of the Special Scholarship Program after the nature and purpose of the test was explained and after it was pointed out that the test could be administered without the student's knowing that the test was designed to evaluate the language proficiency of non-native speakers of English. The experimental use of the Michigan Test for this group of students was stressed and was fully recognized by all of the administrators involved. It was intended that the 12-15 lowest scorers on this test would be identified as possible enrollees in the special section of English 101, but that the students who actually enrolled in the special section would do so only after the general nature of work in the special section had been explained to them beforehand. Thus, in effect, the students in the special section were volunteers in the "experiment". Table I displays the scores on this test achieved by the 12 students who enrolled in the special section. As a partial aid towards assessing the progress of the students through the semester, the Michigan Test was administered to the 12 students three times: in September, December, and January. The results can be seen in Table I, located on the following page.

In reviewing the scores, it is important to recognize (1) that native speakers of English are <u>expected</u> to score close to 100 on the Michigan Test (the test is intended to compare the non-native speaker's proficiency with that of the native speaker's), (2) that, if a foreign student made a score of 79 or below on this test, it would be recommended that he pursue <u>no</u> academic course work whatsoever, and (3) that a full-time

academic course load would be recommended for a foreign student only if he scored 90 or better (87 or better for students in engineering or laboratory-oriented programs) on this test. In view of these considerations, the scores of the 12 students take on added interest.

TABLE I: Michigan Test Scores for Black Students in Special Section of English 101, I Semester 1969-70

	Form B (Sept., 1969)	Form C (Dec., 1969)	Form A (Jan., 1970)
Brown, Lee	79	*(35/32/6) 81	(37/34/14) 83
Brown, Percy	80	(36/32/9) 84	(38/32/12) 85
Castal, Clemmie	71	(33/31/6) 78	(37/31/9) 81
Cooper, Alphonso	83	(37/30/5) 80	(37/36/10) 86
Conley, Fred	77	(33/35/11) 85	(32/28/10) 75
Davies, John	87	(39/39/14) 94	(38/35/15) 90
Hawthorne, Carolyn	85	(no score)	(no score)
Huddleston, Pat	73	(33/30/11) 81	(no score)
Johnson, Larry	83	(37/32/10) 85	(36/33/11) 83
Mc Donald, Shirley	71	(30/28/6) 72	(38/29/7) 78
Smith, George	85	(38/34/9) 87	(no score)
Ward, Cora	83	(35/35/9) 85	(35/33/13) 84

* The sequence of sub-scores in parentheses are scores on the grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension sub-sections of the Michigan Test respectively. Perfect scores on these sub-sections are 40/40/20. It is clear that the students generally did poorest on the reading comprehension section and best on the grammar section.

Details of the semester's work in the special section, including the central concepts underlying the course, are given by Mr. Burr Angle in Part II of this report, and need not be pursued here.

The special "experimental" section of English 101 was, from the beginning, tentatively considered to be the first stage in the development of a Program in English for Black Americans, i.e an instructional program analogous to, but separate from, the Program in English for Foreign Students--both of which are administered through the Programs in English Linguistics. Development of the Program in English for Black Americans

was conducted along several lines, the most important and most immediate of which was the special section of English 101. Additionally, however, funds were secured from the Research Committee of the Graduate School to support one project assistantship for academic year 1969-70. This project assistantship was awarded first to Miss Patricia Huntsman, a graduate student in the Department of Linguistics, and then, in the second semester, to both Mrs. Helen Timothy and Mr. Lee Trucks, graduate students in English linguistics in the Department of English. The project assistantship was requested in order to begin work towards the following goals: (1) the development of special classroom materials to deal specifically with phonological and syntactic features of "Black English" which relate systematically to corresponding features of "Standard English", (2) the development of a bibliographic and reference file of research literature on the linguistic aspects of "Black English", and (3) the construction of a detailed course syllabus for future sections of the Program in English for Black Americans. Professor Philip Luelsdorff, whose own research specialty is the linguistic description and analysis of "Black English", was assigned as a consultant to this project.

The following accomplishments can be noted: (1) classroom materials dealing with contrastive phonological features of "Black English" and "Standard English" have been developed, (2) an extensive Interim Bibliography of Black English (see Report #4 of the Programs in English Linguistics) has been constructed, (3) an actual reference file of many of the items listed in the bibliography has been established, and (4) a course syllabus for special sections of English 101 is underway and should be completed by the end of academic year 1969-70.

The Department of English, through its Programs in English Linguistics, assumes that the Special Scholarship Program will not only continue, but will possibly expand, in the years ahead. Accordingly, it is expected that the Program in English for Black Americans will continue to be a necessary and valuable instructional program for some of the young black students admitted as freshmen to the University of Wisconsin. It is the general feeling among those who have worked with this Program in 1969-70 that the effort has been exceptionally productive and the results very heartening. With a year's experience to draw upon, future work in the Program should be even more gratifying than it has been--with corresponding benefit to the students involved.

Notes

[1]The term "Black English", as it is used here, is a reasonably well-defined term for sociolinguistic researchers. It refers to a variety of English spoken by some blacks in the United States--a variety which is characterized by a constellation of phonological and grammatical features, most of which can also be noted in the speech of many white speakers as well, though not as a characterizing set (see P. Luelsdorff, 'Some Principal Features of Black English', Report #1, Programs in English Linguistics). The set of linguistic features which characterize "Black English" is, to a large extent, a stigmatized set when "Black English" is seen from the point of view of both black and white speakers of "Standard English". As a consequence, the notion of "Black English" is also referred to occasionally as "Non-standard Negro English". Finally, it should be noted that linguists view the "slang" of blacks as only a minor and peripheral feature of "Black English".

PART II

Freshman English Applications of Current Research in Black English

Burr Angle

This report will be based almost exclusively upon my experience in teaching two sections of Freshman English, English 101, at the University of Wisconsin this past year. English 101 at Madison is a one-semester, three-credit course offered to students who have scored very poorly on an English Department test of composition skills. Only a small proportion of incoming freshmen are assigned to English 101--in a typical semester perhaps 150 out of a freshman class of several thousand. About one-half of the English 101 students are American Blacks, especially those admitted by the Five-Year Special Scholarship Program which recruits students who for one reason or another would not usually enter the University, but who show promise of doing well if given financial assistance and if allowed five years to complete the usual four-year degree program. The other half of the English 101 students are a very mixed group, typically American Indians, Mexican-Americans, immigrants and whites from small rural communities. A typical 101 class would have fifteen or fewer students and be taught by a graduate student Teaching Assistant supervised by the Freshman English office.

In the past, many of the Black students had a great deal of difficulty with Freshman English, and it was supposed that perhaps this difficulty might stem from a lack of knowledge of Standard English. We thought that perhaps some of the students spoke a dialect--Black English--so radically divergent from the Standard English (or academic

English) used in written work on this campus that their difficulties were arising from dialect interference and ignorance of Standard English grammar. We had read and heard a great deal about the possibility of teaching Standard English to Blacks as a second dialect and wanted to see if the idea had any validity at the Freshman English level. To test this hypothesis we in the Freshman English office and in the Program in English for Foreign Students, with the cooperation of the directors of the Special Scholarship Program, decided to offer a section of English 101 to a group of Black students who we thought would have extreme difficulty with Freshman English. The method of contrastive analysis has worked well in modern foreign language teaching. We wanted to see if teaching these students Standard English by these techniques, assuming a contrast of Black English and Standard English, would cause any improvement in their ability to read and write Standard English. I was chosen to teach the section because of my several years' experience in teaching English as a second language and because of my interest in Black English.

Accordingly, in September 1969, volunteers were solicited from among the fifteen lowest scorers on the Michigan Test (a 100-item test of Standard English grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension designed originally for evaluating the English language abilities of foreign students) administered to seventy-five out of 150 Special Scholarship Program students selected to take English 101. Twelve students volunteered--seven were from the Mississippi Delta, one from Washington, D.C., and four were from large Northern cities. This all-Black class, labelled the "Special Section", was introduced to the notion of dialect through Roger Shuy's Discovering American Dialects.

They discussed the notion of bi-dialectism after reading selected articles in Social Dialects and Language Learning and did translation exercises from Black English to Standard English after reading Philip Luelsdorff's Some Principle Linguistic Features of Black English. They practiced Standard English pronunciation with Mr. Luelsdorff's SE/BE pronunciation drills. They also studied a number of short essays in terms of their formal organization, mastered the principle of rhetorical unity, studied exam-taking methods, wrote a number of themes and a term paper (all in Standard English) and read and discussed Richard Wright's novel Black Boy (written in Standard English).

The class was successful--morale was high throughout the semester, the students consistently improved in their ability to write well-organized short essays and to handle college level reading assignments. But our original hypothesis was disproven. Although the students came from very segregated and very Black cultures (two from an all-Black Mississippi village), we found that they already knew Standard English grammar, syntactic patterns and pronunciation quite well. On production tests and class exercises where the students were asked to imitate the teacher's pronunciation they did so almost perfectly. When asked to use Standard English on themes and examinations they were able to do so. We discovered that the students did not suffer from problems caused by dialect interference or a crippling lack of knowledge of Standard English forms. We also discovered that the students would use Standard English in exactly the same situations as anyone else--in talking with strangers, elders, teachers, in class discussions, and so forth--and that they felt the distinction between Black English and Standard English disappeared at this formal a level. The students felt that Black English was a set of

features, especially vocabulary items ("slang"), used in informal situations with close friends or among other Blacks as a sign of group identity.

Once this became clear it was obvious that our original plan of teaching Standard English as a second dialect was unfeasible and unnecessary. But we did find that the study of Black English--its history, varying forms, potential uses and adaptation to Black culture--helped the students increase in what I call "linguistic self-confidence". Treating Black English as a respectable and intrinsically interesting linguistic and cultural phenomenon helped do away with much of the students' defensiveness about language use. The great advantage of introducing the concept of Black English turned out not to be as a means of teaching Standard English as a second dialect, but in helping the students towards a more positive view of their culture and language. Studying the concepts of dialect and language variation also helped the students towards a better definition of Standard English and helped them sort out different levels of rhetorical appropriateness. A closer knowledge of exactly how Black English differs or does not differ from Standard English led to a greater confidence in the use of both Black English and Standard English in the classroom.

When this knowledge of Black English/Standard English differences and similarities was coupled with an increased knowledge of the rhetorical forms and models used in college work (short essays, reports, outlining procedures, examination strategies) and when pieces of writing were studied intensively through an analysis of their structural principles, the students' work improved dramatically. It became clear that the students' original

difficulties stemmed not from dialect interference but from a lack of confidence in their abilities to write academic Standard English and from an ignorance of the rhetorical frames and models used in college writing. Again the advantage of teaching about dialects and of contrasting Black English with Standard English turned out to be in helping the students to see that Standard English wasn't such a mysterious beast after all, that they already knew enough grammar and syntax to write well if only they learned the strategies, forms and logics used in college writing. Greater confidence, greater knowledge and rewarding practice with common rhetorical forms led to a fluency in Standard English writing that in turn led to the disappearance of the grammatical and syntactic errors formerly plentifully abounding in their work (errors that we had thought were due to dialect interference). A few Black English grammatical features did keep creeping into the students' Standard English compositions, notably the omitted -ed marker in past and perfect tense verb phrases and the left off -s markers in possessive and plural number phrases. But these were for the most part trivial.

If the students' dialects did not interfere very much with their writing, they had even less to do with their reading difficulties. A student's reading skill and the amount of his or her spoken dialect's divergence from Standard English seemed to be completely independent. Most of the students did not read well and scored very poorly on reading comprehension tests. This, however, seemed to have nothing to do with their dialects--several students whose spoken dialects differed quite radically from Standard English scored better on the reading comprehension tests than others whose dialects differed less radically. It is interesting that the students understood more fully and accurately writing

by Richard Wright and Martin Luther King than by Carl Becker or Joseph Priestley. The reasons for this are perhaps obvious.

Believing that the best way to learn to read carefully is to read intensively, I worked the class through a number of very short (one paragraph to two pages) essays, asking the students to tell me what each word, comma and flyspeck was doing there. The vocabulary of each passage was examined and patterns of movement and logical progression throughout the passage were isolated. This was almost identical to the method of "explication of the text" as used in most literature classes today. We simply carried the technique over into nonliterary subject matter. The students quickly caught on to the method and their reading comprehension improved somewhat. On a so-called factual quiz on Richard Wright's Black Boy nearly all the students scored above 90% correct on very detailed questions. Nevertheless, poor reading comprehension persisted throughout the semester and improvement was gradual and partial. I do think that the close reading method is a valuable one and that the students will do better if a preponderance of the reading material has been produced by contemporary Black writers, but I cannot claim to have found any final solution.

To sum up--our special section was a success in spite of our mistaken initial hypothesis. The students benefited not by studying Standard English as a second dialect, but by learning of the history and relationships of Black English, Standard English and other dialects. When this was coupled with successful practice in using the forms of discourse required in college work, the result was greater linguistic self-confidence and more fluent writing in Standard English. Reading problems were severe and persistent but were not related to the students' use of non-standard dialects.

I would now like to compare my experience with the Special Section to my experience with another English 101 class before suggesting how I think we will use the findings of research in Black English in future Freshman English classes.

This semester I was unexpectedly offered the chance to teach another section of English 101, this time to a mixed group of students--three American Blacks, two native Chinese speakers, an American Indian, the son of a Polish immigrant family, and several students from small northern Wisconsin towns. This class has not studied the notions of dialects and Standard English, nor has the technique of contrastive analysis been applied. Instead more time has been devoted to formal analysis of short essays in terms of overall unity and rhetorical structuring, more time has been given to a kind of unscrambling and ordering exercise (the Humpty-Dumpty method) in which the students are given a set of words and phrases and asked to arrange them into coherent sentences and paragraphs. The amount of essay writing, trial exam taking and term paper writing has been about the same as with the all-Black section. Again I have worked on the assumption that the more a student learns of the forms of writing immediately required for success in staying in college, the more successful the course will be.

I have brought up the second section because I want to point out the very large similarities I have found between the Black students and the students in this class. To begin statistically, in terms of scores on the Michigan Test both sets of students performed identically; not only are the scores the same, but the students miss the same questions and miss them in the same way. Both sets of students have very severe difficulties with close reading and score very poorly on reading comprehension

examinations. Both sets of students suffer from extreme uncertainty, insecurity and confusion in the use of academic Standard English and both sets make nearly identical grammatical and syntactic errors in their written work. In both sets a knowledge of the forms and conventions of the kinds of written discourse needed for college work led to a greater fluency in writing. In both cases a knowledge of the larger structural patterns used in paragraph and essay writing caused a kind of uncramping in which the majority of grammatical errors disappeared.

The students of the second section are now gaining the security and confidence in language handling that the Black students gained, but by a rather different method.

This raises some interesting questions. It reinforces our new hypothesis that the Black students' difficulty in reading and writing stems not from dialect interference but from ignorance of the forms and conventions of academic Standard English writing and an aggravated unconfidence stemming largely from an awareness of this ignorance. This they share with the non-Black English 101 students. Both groups' writing improved tremendously when theses forms and conventions were studied intensively and studied as objects for analysis and re-creation--that is when studied in much the same way a chemist analyzes the structure of a crystal or a botanist the structure of a leaf. Both groups additionally suffer from an insecurity with Standard English, an insecurity stemming from a lack of how their dialects differ or do not differ from Standard English. Not knowing what is appropriate or inappropriate, they hypercorrect and panic. With the Black students a study of contrasting features of Black English and Standard English provided this knowledge. The second section gained this knowledge indirectly via successful sentence and paragraph

building exercises with Standard English. Both groups found they could write academic Standard English once they knew more exactly what it was.

I think it will be possible to take advantage of our experiences with these two sections by combining the best of each into a new synthesis. I would propose that in all sections of English 101 the notions of dialect (social, regional and economic) be taken up and that Black English be studied in contrast with Standard English. Black English would be studied because of its interest, timeliness and relevance to the needs of the increasing number of Black students in the English 101 classes. A study of dialects would be followed by intensive work in the analysis of short essays, essay writing and so forth as was done in each English 101 section I have described. This would enable all the students to place Standard English in its proper relation to their own dialects and would give them the knowledge of formal writing conventions they need. Standard English and its conventions would continue to be the target and the students' achievement of fluency in writing Standard English would be the criterion of success. Until some better method is worked out, reading comprehension exercises would continue to be based upon the explication of the text method.

Because so many of the difficulties of the Black and non-Black students are identical I would not separate the two groups; mixing seems to produce a very desirable vigor and variety. The non-Black students do not object to discussions of Black English nor to the reading of material by Black writers--in fact they seem to find it very interesting and revealing.

Thus the applications of Black English research in our Freshman English classes will be many; but because the analogy with second language learning has turned out to be false, they will differ from what we originally envisioned. I hope that our efforts will now tend towards the development of simple and concise descriptions of the varieties of Black English, the compilation of texts and anthologies revealing the richness of Black English oral culture, studies of the interaction between age-grading and dialect usage, and further work in the history and reasons for survival of Black English dialects. Most importantly, we need explanations of Black English that show respect and understanding for Black cultures and life styles and that examine Black English not merely as a means toward teaching Standard English, but as one of the most important means for the transmission of Afro-American culture.

Appendix

This is an example of in-class writing by one of the students in the second English 101 section.

BLACK MAN'S LANGUAGE

by

Robert Barnett
English 101

As recently as two years ago, you never heard of Black English. Black English was something that always was, but it was never brought out, because it was cover by the white Standard English. Many whites today, especially the young, authors, editors, English teachers, and a great number more are really seeing how Black English is comming on strong. Almost, seven out of ten times you read a book you'll know if it was written by a white or by a Black author. Many whites are now concluding that Black people do have a culture of their own. More than not you find white people wondering why do Blacks speak the way they do, and why do they write just as they speak? Some whites can accept that we're a group of people in this society, but we don't have to accept all its characteristics. I think it is essential to be aware of the differences of each English, because then maybe there will be a better understanding amongst us.

When you look at Standard English and then look at Black English you can see both have differences and similarities. The basis for both are the same; like both have nouns, pronouns, verbs, punctuation marks. When you look to see how these words are use, you find that Black English consist of words that are often referr to as obscene words. Also you find that Black people more often use the present tense of a word for the past tense. When reading a Black author's book you find that sentences are not as complete as when you speak of Standard English.

In a Black community you hear words that are in the dictionary, but the meanings are not the same. Poetry in a Black community is very cool, "Now this was while walking down L.A. Street; I was broke as hell but my clothes were neat. I was broke as hell but feeling fine, just put the last I had on a fifth of wine." Just by reading this you know it was a Black man. We use words like rap, cop, rip off, box, gig, hammer, hen, spoop, and spade. These words and many more are ways which we as a people communicate. Their not new words but words with a different meaning. When talking or writing, we are less formal than in Standard English. When we talk or write we do it with the mood we're in. Black English is really a language within a language.